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I am the Director of the Comparative Media Studies Program and a Professor of Literature at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I hold a Masters in Communication Studies from the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. in Communication Arts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For the past seventeen years, I have made the study of American popular culture the central focus of my teaching and research. To date, I have published six books and more than fifty essays on various questions concerning the aesthetic, social, and cultural impact of popular culture. My first book, Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, focused on the subculture of media fans and their particular investments in and creative reworking of the contents of popular culture. [1] My two most recent books, The Children's Culture Reader and From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games deal centrally with the questions that are before this committee. [2] I am now doing initial research for a study of the ways that digital media are shifting our relationships with popular culture, a project that will particularly focus on the experience of children and youth in a "hypermediated culture."

Many of the others testifying on this panel come from traditions of experimental or quantitative research into "media effects." I represent a different tradition in media studies which employs more "qualitative" methods, including those derived from anthropology, history, and literary analysis. My research seeks to address the meanings that get attached to cultural symbols and the ways that people in specific social and cultural contexts interact with media. I am taking the time to spell out these different approaches to research because they shape how various witnesses on this panel think about media and also shape what kinds of "evidence" or "findings" they present. In this extended statement, I will outline some of the ways this research can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between popular culture and youth violence.

My testimony before this committee also draws on more personal experiences. I am the father of a high school senior whose engagement with and insights about popular culture and digital media have contributed tremendously to my understanding of the relationship of American teens to our changing media environment. Moreover, I have served for the last four years as the housemaster of Senior House, an MIT dormitory, which brings into close daily contact with 150 young people, including a fair share of "goths" and "computer nerds." The Littleton shootings have been a major focus of discussion within the dorm in recent weeks and their thoughts and reactions have played a central role in helping me understand what is at stake for adolescents in the context of our current "moral panic" over violent media. [For a sample of their reactions to the incident, see appendix I] Whatever policy decisions emerge from these hearings, we are going to be most effective in confronting the root causes of youth violence if we seriously attempt to understand contemporary popular culture and why it is meaningful to the youth who consume it. This understanding is going to come from listening to and taking seriously what young people have to say.

The shootings at Colombine High School in Littleton, Colorado several weeks ago have justly sparked a period of national soul searching. This incident was shocking and tragic; it seems

to defy any rational understanding. As parents, educators, citizens, political leaders, we demand to know how such a thing could have happened and we desperately want to believe we can come up with policies or laws that can prevent it from happening again. We want ANSWERS. But we are only going to come up with valid answers if we start by asking the right sets of QUESTIONS. So far, most of the conversation about Littleton has reflected a desire to understand what the media are doing to our children. Instead, we should be focusing our attention on understanding what our children are doing with media.

As more information becomes available to us, it is becoming increasingly clear that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two Littleton shooters, had an especially complex relationship to popular culture. Various pundits have pointed their fingers at video games, violent movies, television series, popular music, comic books, websites, youth subcultures, and fashion choices to locate the cause of their violent behavior. [3]. What have we learned so far? Harris and Klebold played video games. Not surprising -- roughly 80 percent of American boys play video games. [4] Harris and Klebold spent a great deal of time on line. According to Don Tapscott's Growing Up Digital : The Rise of the Net Generation, 11 percent of the world's computer users are under the age of 15. Thirty six percent of American teens use an online service at home, 49 percent at school, and 69 percent have been on-line at least once in their lifetime, compared to 40% of the total population that has been on-line.[5] They engaged in on-line gaming. According to Jon Katz, estimates of online gamers in the United States alone run as high as 15 to 20 million people. [6] Harris and Klebold watched a range of films, including The Matrix, which has been the top money earner in four of the last five weeks. They listened to various popular music groups, some relatively obscure (kmfdm), some highly successful (Marilyn Manson). They may have borrowed certain iconography from the Goth subculture, a subculture that has a history going back to the 1980s and which has rarely been associated with violence or criminal activity. They may have worn black trench coats. None of these cultural choices, taken individually or as an aggregate, differentiates Harris and Klebold from a sizable number of American teenagers who also consumed these same forms of popular culture but have not gone out and gunned down their classmates. The tangled relationship between these various forms of popular culture makes it impossible for us to determine a single cause for their actions. Culture doesn't work that way. Cultural artifacts are not simple chemical agents like carcinogens that produce predictable results upon those who consume them. They are complex bundles of often contradictory meanings that can yield an enormous range of different responses from the people who consume them.

Like the rest of us, Harris and Klebold inhabited a hypermediated culture. The range of media options available to us has expanded at a dramatic rate over the past several decades. We see this expansion everywhere -- the introduction of CDs led to an expansion of the range of popular music kept in circulation; the introduction of cable television has dramatically increased the spectrum of television programs we can watch; the introduction of digital media introduces us to a much broader array of ideas and stories that we would have encountered in a world of centralized gatekeepers; niche marketing has led to an explosion of new specialized magazines, many of them targeting youth. New media technologies are being introduced at an astonishing rate enabling a more participatory relationship to media culture. In such a world, each of us make choices about what kinds of media we want to consume, what kinds of culture are meaningful or emotionally rewarding to us. None of us devote our attention exclusively to only one program, only one recording star, only one network, or only one medium. People define their own media environment through their own particular choices from the huge menu of cultural artifacts and

channels of communication that surround us all the time. Some teens are drawn towards the angst-ridden lyrics of industrial music; others are happily jitterbugging to neo-swing. Selling popular culture to our kids isn't quite the same thing as selling cigarettes to our kids. When it comes to popular culture, we all "roll our own." We cobble together a personal mythology of symbols, images, and stories that we have adopted from the raw materials given us by the mass media, and we invest in those symbols and stories meanings that are personal to us or that reflect our shared experiences as part of one or another subcultural community. In the case of Harris and Klebold, they drew into their world the darkest, most alienated, most brutal images available to them and they turned those images into the vehicle of their personal demons, their antisocial impulses, their psychological maladjustment, their desire to hurt those who have hurt them. In this case, those choices and investments had lethal results.

Banning black trenchcoats or violent video games doesn't get us anywhere. The black trench coats or the song lyrics are only symbols. To be effective in changing the nature of contemporary youth culture, what we want to get at are the meanings that are associated with those symbols, the kinds of affiliations they express, and more importantly, the feelings of profound alienation and powerlessness that pushed these particular kids (and others like them) over the edge. Consuming popular culture didn't make these boys into killers; rather, the ways they consumed popular culture reflected their drive towards destruction. For most kids most of the time, these forms of popular culture provide a normal, if sometimes angst-ridden, release of frustration and tension. Sometimes, indeed most often, as the old joke goes, a cigar is only a cigar and a black trenchcoat is only a raincoat.

Symbols don't necessary have fixed or universal meanings. Symbols gain meanings through their use and circulation across a variety of contexts. Some of those meanings are shared, some of them are deeply personal and private, but once we perceive a need to express a particular feeling or idea, human beings are pretty resourceful at locating a symbol that suits their needs.

It is relatively easy to get rid of one or another symbol. Some symbols -- the swastika for example -- maintain power over thousands of years, although they have often radically shifted meaning over that time. But most of the time, symbols have a very limited shelf life. Half the time media activists focus their energies on combating examples of popular culture that have little or no commercial appeal to begin with. Computer games such as Custer's Revenge, Death Trap, or Postal, which have been the center of so much debate about video game violence had only limited commercial success and are far from the bread and butter of the video game industry, which is, for the most part, far more dependent on its sports-focused games than on combat games. The images found in such marginal works are certainly outrageous, but they are so outrageous that they attract few customers; they alienate their potential market and collapse of their own accord. It is much harder to get rid of the feelings that those symbols express.

I don't need to remind you how many violent crimes have been inspired by one or another passage from the Bible. When we hear such stories about religious fanatics committing violent crimes, we recognize that reading the Bible did not cause these murders, even though some of the violent images that got stuck in the killers' minds originated in one or another passage of scripture. When we encounter such situations, we say that these criminal actions resulted from a misreading of the Bible, that they took those images out of context, that the killers invested those passages with their own sickness. The same claim can be made about the works of popular culture. Popular films and television programs may not have the spiritual depth of the Bible, they will almost certainly not survive as long, but they are still complex works that express many

different ideas and lend themselves to many different uses and interpretations. Sometimes one or another image from mass culture does become part of the fantasy universe of a psychotic, does seem to inspire some of their antisocial behavior, but we need to recognize that these images have also been taken out of context, that they have been ascribed with idiosyncratic meanings. Despite the mass size of the audience for some of the cultural products we are discussing, there are tremendous differences in the way various audience members respond to their influence.

Shortly after I learned about the Colombine High School shootings, I received e-mail from a 16-year-old web mistress who had written to thank me about some comments I made in an interview on media fandom. She gave me the URL for her website and what I found there was truly inspirational. She had produced an enormous array of poems and short stories drawing on characters from one or another popular television series, film, or comic book series. She had organized her friends -- both in her local community and elsewhere in the country -- to write their own stories and poems. Most of them showed a careful crafting and an expressive quality that most high school composition teachers would love to foster in their students. She had made her own selections from the range of popular culture aimed at American youth. For example, she was especially drawn towards more realistic stories dealing with the social relations between teens, to such television series as My So-Called Life, Dawson's Creek, Beverley Hills 90210, and Party of Five, but she was also drawn towards some series that have Gothic overtones, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer or Neil Gaiman's The Sandman comic books. She reached into contemporary youth culture and found there images that emphasized the power of friendship, the importance of community, the wonder of first romance. She used the web to create a space where she and other teens could share what they had created with each other. The mass media didn't make Harris and Klebold violent and destructive any more than it made this girl creative and sociable. These teens drew on the stories that circulate within popular culture as resources for expressing things that were within them. These teens used media as a tool for communicating their perceptions of the world. Their websites look very different because they are very different teens. Even when they are using some of the same images, they don't mean the same things to them.

Mass media is a notoriously blunt instrument. It doesn't do a very good job of catering to our individual tastes and needs. We don't always subscribe to all of the values contained within a particular mass-produced narrative. Even when we are passionate about a particular program or CD, it's pretty likely there will be aspects that frustrate, disappoint, annoy, or even actively offend us. I've observed in my research on media fandom that fan activity is born of a mixture of fascination and frustration. We are drawn to a particular media artifact because it seems to be the best available vehicle for exploring some issue that is deeply important to us, because it entertains us or provides us with pleasure in a way that most other available choices in the marketplace do not. If they did not fascinate us on some level, we would not devote so much of our attention and energy to them. But, if they did not frustrate us on some level, we would also not spend much time scrutinizing, critiquing, and rewriting them. These media artifacts don't fully meet our needs and so we're pushed towards a more intense and often a more critical engagement with them. We want to rewrite them to more perfectly reflect our own desires and fantasies. And these competing feelings of fascination and frustration give rise to the fan websites that are becoming increasingly common on the web.

It is very hard to tell what these artifacts and myths mean from a position outside the cultural community that has grown up around them. All we can see are the symbols; we can't

really get at the meanings that are attached to them without opening some kind of conversation with the people who are using those symbols, who are consuming those stories, and who are deploying those media.

For methodological reasons, empirical research on "media effects" chooses not to address any of these issues, tending to bracket from consideration issues about media content, context, and form as beyond its purview. Empirical researchers can only work with simple variables. Consequently, they offer only crude insights into the actual consequences of consuming violent media within specific real world contexts. They can tell us that certain media images stimulate neural responses, creating a state of tension or arousal. They can measure certain attitude shifts after consuming media images. But, in both cases, it takes a series of interpretive leaps and speculations to move from such data to any meaningful claim that media images causes real world behavior. Most "media effects" researchers pull back from making any confident claims about the possible links between popular culture and youth violence, because decades of research on media violence still yields contradictory and confusing results.

Media effects research typically starts from the assumption that we know what we mean by "media violence," that we can identify and count violent acts when we see them, that we can choose or construct a representative example of media violence and use it as the basis for a series of controlled experiments. Under most circumstances, our children don't experience violent images abstracted from social or narrative contexts. Exposing children to such concentrated doses of decontextualize violence focuses their attention on the violent acts and changes the emotional tone which surrounds them. Storytelling depends upon the construction of conflict and in visual based media, conflict is often rendered visible by being staged through violence. Stories help to ascribe meaning to the violent acts they depict. When we hear a list of the sheer number of violent acts contained on an evening of American television, it feels overwhelming. But, each of these acts occurs in some kind of a context and we need to be attentive to the specifics of those various contexts. When Leonardo diCaprio's character kills himself at the end of William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, it means something different than when his character fantasizes about anti-social violence in The Basketball Diaries. Some works depict violence in order to challenge the culture that generates that violence; other works celebrate violence as an appropriate response to social humiliation or as a tool for restoring order in a violent and chaotic culture or as a vehicle of patriotism. Some works depict self- defense; others acts of aggression. Some make distinctions between morally justifiable and morally unjustifiable violence; some don't. We know this, of course, because we are all consumers of violent images. We read murder mysteries; we watch news reports; we enjoy war movies and westerns; we go to operas and read classic works of western literature. So many of the films, for example, which have been at the center of debates about media violence -- A Clockwork Orange, Pulp Fiction, Natural Born Killers, The Basketball Diaries, and now The Matrix -- are works that have provoked enormous critical debates because of their thematic and aesthetic complexity, because they seem to be trying to say something different about our contemporary social environment and they seem to be finding new images and new techniques for communicating their meanings. Depicting violence is certainly not the same thing as promoting violence. Cultural studies research tells us we need to make meaningful distinctions between different ways of representing violence, different kinds of stories about violence, and different kinds of relationships to violent imagery. [7]

Media effects research often makes little or no distinction between the different artistic conventions we use to represent violent acts. At its worst, media effects research makes no

distinction between violent cartoons or video games that offer a fairly stylized representation of the world around us and representation of violence that are more realistic. Other researchers, however, show that children learn at an early age to make meaningful distinctions between different kinds of relationships between media images and the realm of their own lived experience.[8] These studies suggest that children are fairly adept at dismissing works that represent fantastic, hyperbolic, or stylized violence and are more likely to be emotionally disturbed by works that represent realistic violence and especially images of violence in documentary films (predator-prey documentaries, war films) that can not be divorced from their real world referents. Such research would suggest that children are more likely to be disturbed by reports of violent crimes on the evening news than representations of violence in fictional works.

One of the most significant aspects of play is that play is divorced from real life. Play exists in a realm of fantasy that strips our actions of their everyday consequences or meanings. Classic studies of play behavior among primates, for example, suggest that apes make basic distinctions between play fighting and actual combat. In some circumstances, they seem to take pleasure wrestling and tousling with each other and in other contexts, they might rip each other apart in mortal combat.[9] We do things in our fantasies that we would have no desire to do in real life, and this is especially true of fantasies that involve acts of violence.[10] The pleasure of play stems at least in part from escapism. The appeal of video game violence often has more to do with feelings of empowerment than with the expression of aggressive or hurtful feelings. Our children feel put down by teachers and administrators, by kids on the playground; they feel like they occupy a very small space in the world and have very limited ability to shape reality according to their needs and desires. Playing video games allows them to play with power, to manipulate reality, to construct a world through their fantasies in which they are powerful and can exert control. The pleasure stems precisely from their recognition of the contrast between the media representations and the real world. It is not the case that media violence teaches children that real world violence has no consequence. Rather, children can take pleasure in playing with power precisely because they are occupying a fantastic space that has little or no direct relationship to their own everyday environment. Fantasy allows children to express feelings and impulses that have to be carefully held in check in their real world interactions. Such experiences can be cathartic, can enable a release of tension that allows children to better cope with their more mundane frustrations.[11] The stylized and hyperbolic quality of most contemporary entertainment becomes one of the primary markers by which children distinguish between realistic and playful representations of violence.

Let us be clear: while I am questioning both the methodology and the conclusions employed by a central tradition of media effects research, I am not arguing that children learn nothing from the many hours they spend consuming media; I am not arguing that the content of our culture makes no difference in the shape of our thoughts and our feelings. Quite the opposite. Of course, we should be concerned about the content of our culture; we should be worried if violent images push away other kinds of representations of the world. The meanings youths weave into their culture are at least partially a product of the kinds of fantasy materials they have access to and therefore we should subject those materials to scrutiny. We should encourage children to engage critically with the materials of their culture. But, popular culture is only one influence on our children's fantasy lives. As the Littleton case suggests, the most powerful influences on children are those they experience directly, that are part of their immediate environment at school or at home. In the case of Harris and Klebold, these influences apparently

included a series of social rejections and humiliations and a perception that adult authorities weren't going to step in and provide them with protection from the abuse directed against them from the "in crowd."

We can turn off a television program or shut down a video game if we find what it is showing us ugly, hurtful, or displeasing. We can't shut out the people in our immediate environment quite so easily. Many teenagers find going to school a brutalizing experience of being required to return day after day to a place where they are ridiculed and taunted and sometimes physically abused by their classmates and where school administrators are slow to respond to their distress and can offer them few strategies for making the abuse stop. Media images may have given Harris and Klebold symbols to express their rage and frustration, but the media did not create the rage or generate their alienation. What sparked the violence was not something they saw on the internet or on television, not some song lyric or some sequence from a movie, but things that really happened to them. When we listen to young people talk about the shootings, they immediately focus on the pain, suffering, and loneliness experienced by Harris and Klebold, seeing something of their own experiences in the media descriptions of these troubled youths, and struggling to understand the complex range of factors which insure that they are going to turn out okay while the Colorado adolescents ended up dead. [appendix one] If we want to do something about the problem, we are better off focusing our attention on negative social experiences and not the symbols we use to talk about those experiences.

Some of the experts who have stepped forward in the wake of the Littleton shootings have accused mass media of teaching our children how to perform violence -- as if such a direct transferal of knowledge were possible. The metaphor of media as a teacher is a compelling but ultimately misleading one. As a teacher, I would love to be able to decide exactly what I want my students to know and transmit that information to them with sufficient skill and precision that every student in the room learned exactly what I wanted, no more and no less. But, as teachers across the country can tell you, teaching doesn't work that way. Each student pays attention to some parts of the lesson and ignores or forgets others. Each has their own motivations for learning. Whatever "instruction" occurs in the media environment is even more unpredictable. Entertainers don't typically see themselves as teaching lessons. They don't carefully plan a curriculum. They don't try to clear away other distractions. Consumers don't sit down in front of their television screens to learn a lesson. Their attention is even more fragmented; their goals in taking away information from the media are even more personal; they aren't really going to be tested on what they learn. Those are all key differences from the use of video games as a tool of military training and the use of video games for recreation. The military uses the games as part of a specific curriculum with clearly defined goals, in a context where students actively want to learn and have a clear need for the information and skills being transmitted, and there are clear consequences for not mastering those skills. None of this applies to playing these same or similar games in a domestic or arcade context.

So far, the media response to the Littleton shootings has told us a great deal more about what those symbols mean to adults than what they mean to American youth, because for the most part, it is the adults who are doing all of the talking and the youth who are being forced to listen. Three key factors have contributed to the current media fixation on the role of popular culture in the shootings:

1)**Adult fears of adolescents and their culture**. Tremendous emotion surrounds the transition from child to adult. The teens struggle with issues of autonomy, the adult with issues of mortality. For thousands of years, our mythology has told stories of adults who cast out their own children because they fear that they will kill them and take their place. What those stories express is an age-old process of transition between generations. Teenagers want to break free from their parents earlier, on average, than parents want to turn loose of their children, but the tug-of-war between those impulses is central to the process of coming of age within our culture. Popular culture has increasingly become a vehicle for the complex feelings surrounding this key transitional point in the human life cycle. Teenagers are drawn towards popular culture as a means of defining their self identities (seeing cultural symbols as vehicles of self expression and individualization) and their relationship to their peer culture (seeing cultural symbols as means of signaling their affiliation with others who share their tastes, experiences, values, or interests). The Black trenchcoats associated with the Littleton shooting function on both levels, signaling the wearer's refusal to conform to certain modes of dress sanctioned by adult authorities and preferred by the "in crowd" and expressing membership in an alternative social community, however small and isolated that group must have felt.

Adolescents often choose symbols to demark the differences between their generation and those who came before, whether those symbols are the zoot suits of the 1940s, the duck tails of the 1950s, the love beads of the 1960s, or the goth garb of the 1990s. As part of that process, youth are often attracted to images that are "shocking" or "offensive" to their parents. When we look at such symbols, we often find that their most important content is the repudiation of adult tastes. In the 1970s, British punks used the swastika as a symbol not because they embraced Nazism but because they knew this symbol was so powerfully offensive to a generation of adults who came of age during the Second World War. [12] The same can be said about the supernatural or death-related imagery associated with the goth subculture.

I asked a 24 year old graduate student who had a long history of close involvement with the goth movement what I should tell this committee about the goths. Her response speaks for itself:

"In high school, before there was even the label 'goth', some of the disenfranchised youth started to hang out together to give ourselves a safe place to be depressed. Really, that is how I remember it. We were all fed up with not fitting in, not being happy, not being athletic, and so forth, and EXTREMELY fed up with being picked on by those who were. So, we started to band together as a support group. Left to ourselves, we listened to depressing music, watched depressing movies, and generally moped about. We also started wearing black, which at the time was mostly to distinguish ourselves from the normals of the school (the 80's were a very pastel decade) than to make a real statement."

"Over the years, 'goth' has evolved into a much more coherent genre. It has its own dance clubs, record labels, bands, fashion sense and required reading list. But it's still basically about the same thing. People want a safe space to explore the more depressing aspects of the world they live in. They don't want to feel guilty for not being happy all the time, they don't want to be told to get on Prozac, and they don't want to force themselves to put on masks for the benefit of the people around them."

"Goths, in my experience, are more into exploring their own pain than inflicting any on other people. They would rather sit in the dark and contemplate their own misery than set about trying to hurt anyone else. I know that sounds like a horrible generalization, but as far as being goth is concerned it is much nobler to glory in your own pain than to go out and harm other people because you're not happy. The goths I know don't initiate fights, they don't date rape, they don't carry guns, they don't pick on others, they don't force confrontations. They spend a lot of time complaining that the rest of the world 'doesn't understand' them, but they don't really want to go out of their way to make people understand. They have their own interests and really just want to be left to them."

"Most people get scared by the symbols that accompany being Gothic - the black clothes, candles, ankhs, vampire symbology and so forth. Most of this, in the simplest sense, can be attributed to the Gothic belief that other times and places were far more gentle and accepting of the sorrows of life. The ankh is a badge of being Gothic for many reasons - it is the Egyptian symbol of life (a rather positive symbol at that), it stands for a people who viewed their entire worldly existence as a stepping stone to a happier world beyond death."

"Which brings up the famous Gothic fascination with death. Most people don't realize that, when goths talk or obsess over the topic of death, they're talking about their own final experience on Earth. The Gothic attitude is that death is our last ride, and we only get one chance at it. It is to be revered and a natural part of being human, not feared and hidden from view. The Gothic focus on death has nothing to do with murder or the experience of others."

"Strange aside: I was just on the phone with my Mother, who was very distressed when I came home after my first year of college wearing Gothic fashion and listening to Gothic music. But after seeing it in me and my friends and learning about it, she had this to say. "The people I'm least afraid of in the world are the Goth kids. I was afraid of it when you first started because I thought you'd be going to wild sex orgies with whips and chains, and I think most people don't realize that those things aren't what being Gothic is about. You guys only wanted to sit around, watch movies and drink coffee." (which, incidentally, is pretty much how my mom spends all of her free time)"

Contemporary youth culture appears to many adult observers to be overwhelmingly dark and pessimistic -- but this is hardly a recent phenomenon. The original model for the goths were the romantics (such as Lord Byron or Percy Shelly) and the aesthetics (such as Oscar Wilde and August Beardsley). In reading contemporary descriptions of the goths, one is reminded of the lyrics to a song from Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, Patience, which was written as a spoof of the morbid self-absorption, languid moping, and loud proclamations of doom and despair associated with the aesthetic movement. Yet, Gilbert and Sullivan recognized that most such behaviors and attitudes were something of sham, a series of poses and pretenses calculated to establish one's membership within a subcultural community. Their comic opera suggests that the aesthetic movement had embraced a series of symbol that meant something quite different to them than to those outside their little circle.

The symbols of adolescent culture often have a certain hyperbolic quality that reflects the urgency felt by youth who see their lives undergoing profound and rapid changes and who need

someway of sharing their uneasiness with the world. Adolescent symbols often divide the world into extreme blacks and whites, and if their parents have chosen to define the "white" side, then they are going to explore the "dark side" on their own. This does not mean that our children are being drawn to devil worship and demonology, only that they are constructing fantasies on a symbolic terrain designed to contrast as strongly as possible with the familiar world of their own upbringing. They want to become themselves and often that means becoming someone other than their mother or father.

To some degree, all of this is perfectly normal, perfectly healthy, and all but inevitable. Most kids left to their own devices find their way back to their parents, accept their proper place in the adult world, regain some equilibrium once this process is over. Yet, knowing this doesn't always make it any easier to cope with adolescents in your family or in your neighborhood. On a bad day, the best adolescents can be hurtful and disrespectful. They call our bluff and reveal our hypocrisies; they push back too hard sometimes and we are often unprepared for the blows they deliver onto us. They aren't always eager to explain things to us and in fact, they take pleasure in our befuddlement when confronting their culture. Youth symbols are often cryptic to adults, making sense only within the context provided by membership within the youth subculture, and adults are correct to feel vaguely threatened by those symbols, since part of what they are expressing is the desire of youth to define themselves in opposition to their parent's culture.

Yet, the cryptic nature of these symbols often means adults invest them with all of our worst fears, all of our own anxieties about the process of our children breaking away from us and becoming their own persons. Because we don't understand what these symbols mean, we make them mean what we most fear that they mean. A certain hysteria develops that comes bubbling to the surface whenever we find an incident which seems to give some degree of credibility to our fears. Few of the adult commentators on the shootings have much direct knowledge of the forms of popular culture they are discussing; they can only look at the symbols and make assumptions about what they mean. We have been given a series of images, ripped from any meaningful context, and described by "experts" who are often profoundly ignorant of their place in youth culture. We are not making even the most gross distinctions between different youth movements and their goals, values, contexts, and followings. Harris and Klebold were initially labeled as goths, though it is increasingly clear that they had little or no direct affiliation with this subculture and that their values were totally opposed to the tolerance of diversity and pacifism that are central to the goth's definition of themselves. Such a muddled map of the landscape of youth culture is not a meaningful basis for forming social policy. Unless you move beyond such gross generalizations and deal with these symbols in more specific contexts, these hearings are more likely to fan the growing hysteria than to yield any meaningful public policy.

2)**Adult fears of new technologies**. According to a survey in The Washington Post last week, 82 percent of Americans cite the internet as a potential cause of the shootings. [13] The internet is no more to blame for the Columbine shootings than the telephone is to blame for the Lindbergh Kidnapping. The internet is a channel of communication just like the telephone; it can be used to heal or to hurt. What such statistics suggest is the degree to which adults are anxious about the current rate of technological change. Writers have noted for several years now that young people are responding to the participatory potential of digital media in profoundly different ways that their parents have. Children are the fastest growing demographic group on the internet. In his book, Virtuous Reality, Jon Katz writes: "Children are at the epicenter of the information

revolution, ground zero of the digital world. They helped build it, they understand it as well as, or better than, anyone else....Children in the digital age are neither unseen nor unheard. In fact, they see and hear more than children ever have. They occupy a new kind of cultural space. They're citizens of a new order." [14] Their parents often do not understand the nature of these new media, do not understand why their children find these on-line communities so attractive, and do not understand how their children seem so free and comfortable navigating digital environments that the adults find to so terribly intimidating. Our children seem to be going places where we can not follow them. Even where adults have direct personal experience with digital media, there is a fundamental difference in how you think about the computer depending upon whether, like most of the adult population, you initially experienced it as a tool of the workplace or the classroom or whether, as this younger generation has, you initially experience it in the context of your recreational or social life.

Many adults want children to spend time working with their computers because they see them as necessary tools for educational and professional development. There has been an enormous push to wire our classroom as well as concern about those children being left behind by the digital revolution, those who lack access to technologies that can shape their future. But, many adults also perceive the amount of time children spend on the computer as a form of addiction which potentially isolates them from others. To use Joseph Lieberman's evocative phrase, they perceive the computer as the "nightmare before Christmas," as a threat to their relationships with their children and to their offspring's mental health. These parents and adult leaders fail to recognize that most of the time their children are on the computer, they are engaging in a profoundly social activity. The computer has become a central point of access to their peer culture. For many kids, like Harris and Klebold, who feel isolated in their own schools, who have become outcasts or social pariahs, going on-line becomes a way of forming alternative social support networks, of finding someone out there somewhere who doesn't think you are a gross geek -- even if that person lives on the other side of the country or the other side of the planet. Yes, our children can fall into bad company on-line, as they can in real life, but the internet has expanded the potential that our children will be able to find their way into a good and supportive community because they are not restricted to the people in their own immediate geographic area.

We thus need to move beyond our technophobic reactions to unfamiliar media and instead try to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what our children are doing when they go on-line. Research on young people's relationship to digital technology is still at its early stages and may not yet allow us to make meaningful generalizations, but it seems clear that going on-line liberates children from some of the limitations of their immediate environment, gives them access to an expanded range of ideas and information, encourages a more participatory relationship to their culture and their government, empowers them to ask important questions of adult authorities, and makes it possible to distribute the products of their reactive impulses to a much larger public. In the long term, such shifts in their perception of themselves and the world around them will have a profound impact on their future roles as citizens, workers, consumers, and parents.

3) **The increased visibility of youth culture**. A dramatic increase in the birthrate in the wake of the Second World War generated a huge demographic bubble we now call "the Baby Boom." Sociologists are suggesting that America once again is undergoing a dramatic increase in the

number of children and youth in relation to the adult population. At the present moment, roughly 30 percent of the American population were born between 1977 and 1997, compared to those born between 1946 and 1964 (the so-called Baby Boom) which constitutes 29 percent of the current population and those born between 1965 and 1976 (the so-called Generation X) who constitute 16 percent of the population. [15] This demographic shift is already being felt in terms of the impact of youth tastes upon mass media content. More and more films, television shows, and other media products are being made to appeal to youth tastes. Adults are feeling more and more estranged from the dominant forms of popular culture, which now reflect their children's values rather than their own.

Moreover, youth culture is more exposed to adult scrutiny than ever before. Video games have emerged as an entertainment genre in the context of children's diminished access to real world play spaces. [16] When I was growing up in suburban Atlanta in the 1960s, there were numerous backlots where we could play largely outside of adult control and supervision. These back lots were where "boy culture" took shape. What E. Anthony Rotundo calls "boy culture" emerged in the context of the growing separation of the male public sphere and the female private sphere in the wake of the industrial revolution. [17] Boys were cut off from the work life of their fathers and left under the care of their mothers. According to Rotundo, boys escaped from the home into the outdoors play space, freeing them to participate in a semi-autonomous "boy culture" which cast itself in opposition to maternal culture:

> Where women's sphere offered kindness, morality, nurture and a gentle spirit, the boys' world countered with energy, self-assertion, noise, and a frequent resort to violence. The physical explosiveness and the willingness to inflect pain contrasted so sharply with the values of the home that they suggest a dialogue in actions between the values of the two spheres — as if a boy's aggressive impulses, so relentlessly opposed at home, sought extreme forms of release outside it; then, with stricken consciences, the boys came home for further lessons in self-restraint. (Rotundo, p.37)

The boys took transgressing maternal prohibitions as proof they weren't "mama's boys." Rotundo argues that this break with the mother was a necessary step towards autonomous manhood.

In the late twentieth century, children have a diminished access to real world play spaces for many different reasons: there is less and less space in our increasing urban and suburban culture that is not developed; more and more children live in apartment complexs and do not have backyards; more and more people feel anxious about the safety of their children playing in public parks and in their neighborhoods. Video games offer these latchkey children a virtual playspace which enables them to engage in competitive or exploratory play within the safety of their own homes; video games promise children a "complete freedom of movement" that contrasts sharply with their direct experience of domestic confinement. In doing so, they transmit many of the values of traditional "boy culture" into this technological environment. Much as earlier kids gained recognition from their peers for their daring, often proven through stunts (such as swinging on vines, climbing trees, or leaping from rocks as they cross streams) or through pranks (such as stealing apples or doing mischief on adults), video games allow kids to gain recognition for their daring as demonstrated in the virtual worlds of the game, overcoming obstacles, beating

bosses, and mastering levels. The central virtues of the 19th century "boy culture" were mastery and self-control. The central virtues of video game culture are mastery (over the technical skills required by the games) and self-control (manual dexterity). Traditional "boy culture" was hierarchical with a member's status dependent upon competitive activity, direct confrontation and physical challenges. The boy fought for a place in the gang's inner circle, hoping to win admiration and respect. Twentieth century video game culture can also be hierarchical with a member gaining status by being able to complete a game or log a big score. Far from a "corruption" of the culture of childhood, video games show strong continuities to the boyhood play fondly remembered by previous generations.

There is a significant difference, however. The 19th century "boy culture" enjoyed such freedom and autonomy precisely because their activities were staged within a larger expanse of space, because boys could occupy an environment largely unsupervised by adults. Nineteenth century boys sought indirect means of breaking with their mothers, escaping to spaces that were outside their control, engaging in secret activities they knew would have met parental disapproval. The mothers, on the other hand, rarely had to confront the nature of this "boy culture" and often didn't even know that it existed. The video game culture, on the other hand, occurs in plain sight, in the middle of the family living room, or at best, in children's rooms. Mothers come face to face with the messy process by which western culture turns boys into men, and it becomes the focus of open antagonisms and the subject of tremendous guilt and anxiety.

Similarly, Harris and Klebold's websites exposed their darkest thoughts, fantasies, and plans to public scrutiny. They were hidden in plain sight, there for anyone to see. Some neighbors brought the website to the attention of the local police well before the shootings occurred. Several organizations committed to monitoring hate groups knew of their existence and had records of their ramblings in their files. The police did not adequately respond to that knowledge; adults didn't take their fantasies seriously enough. Indeed, if we had developed a better grasp of contemporary youth culture and its various symbols, we might have been able to meaningfully distinguish between normal adolescent restlessness and the signs of an emotionally disturbed personality. But the fact that their plots and schemes were out there on the web, rather than scribbled in a diary hidden under their bed, suggests that this new technology makes it possible for us to see and know more about our sons and daughters than ever before. So much of the coverage of this youth culture emphasizes the degree to which it is hidden from adult view, but actually, the opposite is the case. We are frightened because the youth culture is being brought into our view for the first time. If we are ignorant of contemporary youth culture, it can only be described as willful ignorance in a world where children are playing out their violent fantasies under their parents' noses and posting their aggressive desires onto the world wide web.

The media backlash against popular culture in the wake of the Littleton shootings reflects these three factors -- our generational anxiety about the process of adolescence, our technophobic reaction about our children's greater comfort with digital technologies, and our painful discovery of aspects of our children's play and fantasy lives which have long existed but were once hidden from view. Read in this context, the materials of youth culture can look profoundly frightening, but much of what scares us is a product of our own troubled imaginations and is far removed from what these symbols mean to our children.

All of the above suggests a basic conclusion: banning specific media images will have little or no impact on the problem of youth crime, because doing so gets at symbols, not at the meanings those symbols carry and not at the social reality that gives such urgency to teens'

investments in those cultural materials. A model that reduces such complex cultural phenomenon to a series of crude stimuli and responses doesn't provide much guidance in how to actually respond to our changing media environment. What we need to do is learn more than we have so far about what are children are doing with these new media, what place the contents of popular culture have assumed in their social and cultural life, and what personal and subcultural meanings they invest in such symbols. The best way to do that is to create opportunities for serious conversations about the nature of our children's relationships with popular culture. One project which sets a good example for such discussions is the “Superhero TV Project” conducted by Ellen Seiter at the University of California-San Diego. Seiter recognized the centrality of superhero cartoons, games, comics, and action heroes to preschool children and recognized the recurring concerns parents and teachers had about the place of those materials in the children's lives. [18] Seiter and her graduate students worked with teachers to encourage classroom activities centering around these superhero myths. Students were encouraged to invent their own superheroes and to make up stories about them. Students discussed their stories in class and decided that they would collaborate in the production of a superhero play. Through the classroom discussions about what kinds of physical actions could be represented in their play, teachers and students talked together about the place of violence in the superhero stories and what those violent images meant to them. Through such conversations, both students and teachers developed a much better understanding of the role of violent imagery in popular entertainment.

Such open-minded and exploratory exchanges seem vital as we struggle to understand why our children are so invested in these images. We should be prepared to learn, for example, that violent images are far less central to their experience of these stories than they are to our perception of them. Children and adolescents may take violent images for granted, not because they are desensitized to violence, but because they aren't especially interested in the violence. What draws them to these stories might have to do with the larger than life heroics of their protagonists, with the intensity of emotion and experience these programs offer, with the heady rush of rapid action and flashy visual style. In researching my recent book on gender and computer games, I stumbled onto the Quake Grrlz movement. [19] These young women in their teens and early twenties were, like Harris and Klebold, involved in on-line gaming, designing their own combat arenas, "combating" others who shared their seemingly "blood-thirsty" tastes and interests. What drew these young women to games like Quake and Doom, however, wasn't that you could see blood spurt when you shot your opponents but simply that the digital environment, for the first time, allowed women to aggressively compete with men without regard to the physical differences between the genders. These women were taking great pleasure in beating the boys at their own games; they experienced the aggressive on-line play as a vehicle of empowerment, arguing that learning to play fantasy combat as a child would help them prepare -- mentally and emotionally -- for professional lives where they would have to compete with men. One of the women explained, "Maybe it's a problem...that little girls DON'T like to play games that slaughter entire planets. Maybe that's why we are still underpaid, still struggling, still fighting for our rights. Maybe if we had the mettle to take on an entire planet, we could fight some of the smaller battles we face everyday." Playing these games had led these women to form on-line communities that offered technical and moral support to other women, that staged critical debates about those aspects of contemporary fighting games that displeased these women, that foregrounded the accomplishments of women in the game industry, and that helped to organize consumer activism campaigns to insure a better match between popular culture and their own

needs and interests.

Writing for the slashdot.com website, journalist Jon Katz has described a fundamentally different reaction to popular culture in high schools across America in the wake of the Littleton shootings (appendix two). Schools are shutting down student access to the net and the web. Parents are cutting their children off from access to their on-line friends or forbidding them to play computer games. Students are being suspended for coming to school displaying one or another cultural symbol (black trench coats, heavy metal t-shirts). Students are being punished or sent into therapy because they express opinions in class discussions or essays that differ from the views about the events being promoted by their teachers. Guidance counselors are drawing on checklists of symptoms of maladjustment to try to ferret out those students who are outsiders and either force them into the mainstream or punish them for their dissent. The various letters Katz has reproduced through his column make for chilling reading because they suggest the consequence of adult ignorance about youth culture and their intolerance of any form of expression that differs from their own norms and values. Rather than teaching students to be more tolerant of the diversity they encounter in the contemporary high school, these educators and administrators are teaching their students that difference is dangerous, that individuality should be punished, and that self expression should be curbed. In this polarized climate, it becomes impossible for young people to explain to us what their popular culture means to them without fear of repercussion and reprisals. We are pushing this culture further and further underground where it will be harder and harder for us to study and understand it. We are cutting off students at risk from the lifeline provided by their on-line support groups.

We all want to do something about the children at risk . We all want to do something about the proliferation of violent imagery in our culture. We all want to do something to make sure events like the Littleton shootings do not occur again. But repression of youth culture is doomed not only to fail but to backfire against us. Instead, we need to take the following steps:

1)We need to create contexts where students can form meaningful and supportive communities through their use of digital media. Sameer Parekh, a 24-year-old software entrepreneur, has offered one such model through his development of the High School Underground website (http://www.hsunderground.com). His site invites students who feel ostracized at school to use the web as a means of communicating with each other about their concerns, as a tool of creative expression and social protest, as the basis for forming alliances that leads to an end of the feelings of loneliness and isolation. (Appendix three) We need to have more spaces like High School Underground that provide a creative and constructive direction for children who are feeling cut off from others in their schools or communities. A number of websites have been built within the goth subculture to explain its perplexing images to newcomers, to challenge its representation in the major media, and to rally support for the victims of the shootings. (Appendix four)

2) We also need to work on building a more accepting and accommodating climate in our schools, one which is more tolerant of difference, one which seeks to understand the cultural choices made by students rather than trying to prohibit them open expression. A core assumption behind any democratic culture is that truth is best reached through the free market of ideas, not through the repression of controversial views. Popular culture has become a central vehicle by which we debate core issues in our society. Our students need to learn how to process and evaluate those materials and reach their own judgements about what is valuable and what isn't in

the array of media entering their lives. They need to do this in a context that respects their right to dignity and protects them from unreasoned and unreasonable degrees of abuse. What should have rang alarm bells for us in the aftermath of the Littleton shooting is how alone and at risk students can feel in their schools and how important it is for us to have a range of different activities, supported by caring and committed teachers, which can pull all of our students into the school community and not simply those the school values because of their good grades, good sports skills, or good conduct. All signs are that Harris and Klebold were enormously talent and created kids who never found an outlet where they could get respect for what they created from the adults in their community.

3)We need to provide more support for media education in our schools. Given the centrality of media in contemporary life, media issues need to be integrated into all aspects of our K-12 curriculum, not as a special treat, but as something central to our expectations about what children need to learn about their environment. Most contemporary media education is designed to encourage children to distance themselves from media culture. The governing logic is "just say no to Nintendo" and "turn off your television set." Instead, we need to focus on teaching children how to be safe, critical, and creative users of media. Research suggests that when we tell students that popular culture has no place in our classroom discussions, we are also signaling to them that what they learn in school has little or nothing to say about the things that matter to them in their after school hours. [20]

3) For this new kind of media literacy to work, our teachers and administrators need to be better informed about the nature of popular culture and their students' investments in media imagery. Such understanding cannot start from the assumption that such culture is meaningless or worthless, but has to start from the recognition that popular culture is deeply significant to those who are its most active consumers and participants. The contents of that culture shift constantly and so we need to be up to date on youth subcultures, on popular music, on popular programs.

4)We need to provide fuller information to parents about the content of media products so that they can make meaningful and informed choices about what forms of popular culture they want to allow into their homes. They need to know what their children are consuming and why it appeals to them. The ratings system introduced by the game industry goes a long way towards addressing this concern, establishing a consistent base-line against which to measure the content of video games. But the ratings system for games and for television needs to be more nuanced, needs to provide more specific information. We also need to create more websites where parents respond to the games and other media products they have purchased and share their insights and reactions with other parents.

5) We need to challenge the entertainment industry to investigate more fully why violent entertainment appeals to young consumers and then to become more innovative and creative at providing alternative fantasies that satisfy their needs for empowerment, competition, and social affiliation.

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[14] Jon Katz, Virtuous Reality (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 173.

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[16] Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement': Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces," in Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Eds.), From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), pp. 262-297.

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[19] See "Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back," in Cassell and Jenkins (op. cit.), pp.328-341.

[20] Hodge and Tripp, op. cit.

Appendix to follow: